



Responsibility Without a Bearer

Agency After Interruptibility - Essay 2

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For most of modern moral and legal theory, responsibility has been inseparable from a bearer. An action presupposed an agent. An outcome implied an author. Blame, praise, guilt, and legitimacy all relied on the same structural intuition: if responsibility exists, it must belong to someone.

That intuition is no longer structurally secure.

Across contemporary decision systems, responsibility persists while its bearer disappears.

Outcomes occur, sanctions are imposed, legitimacy is demanded, yet no identifiable agent stands behind the decisive moment. What remains is responsibility without ownership normative weight without a subject capable of carrying it.

This is not a philosophical puzzle. It is a lived condition.

The Inheritance We Can No Longer Afford

Classical accounts of responsibility assume a stable alignment: someone decides → something happens → someone answers.

Even when responsibility was distributed across institutions, corporations, or states it was never orphaned. These entities functioned as bearers by design: legally addressable, sanctionable, capable of standing in for authorship even without consciousness or intention. Responsibility remained locatable.

What is now emerging is structurally different.

Decisions are produced by layered systems in which:

- no participant fully controls the outcome,
- no single moment qualifies as the decision,
- and no role plausibly claims authorship without misrepresentation.

Responsibility remains socially required, but no longer fits any available bearer.

Why This Is Not Collective Responsibility

The temptation is to redescribe the situation as collective or shared responsibility. This move fails.

Collective responsibility presupposes a collective capable of internal coordination, deliberation, and self-modification in response to blame. It still assumes a bearer plural, but intact.

What we face instead is structural orphaning.

Responsibility is generated by systems whose operation requires participation but forbids ownership. Engineers design without deciding. Operators approve without authorship. Institutions deploy without comprehension. Users act within environments they did not choose and cannot reconstruct.

Each contribution is real. None is decisive.

Responsibility does not distribute. It floats.

The Moral Surplus of Automated Action

Automated and algorithmically mediated systems do not eliminate responsibility. They generate more of it.

Every consequential output demands justification. Every harm provokes a demand for accountability. Every failure triggers sanctions, audits, reforms, or outrage. Responsibility intensifies precisely as agency thins.

This produces a moral surplus: normative pressure without a locus of discharge.

Blame does not disappear. It misfires.

Punishment lands where enforcement is possible, not where decision occurred. Legitimacy is asserted by institutions that no longer govern the decisive layer. Moral language proliferates while moral traction declines.

The problem is not ethical confusion. It is structural mismatch.

Responsibility After Agency Migration

When agency migrates into systems that operate beneath awareness and beyond interruption, responsibility follows but only partially. It remains attached to outcomes, not to decisions. It survives as expectation without grounding.

This explains a growing instability in contemporary moral life:

- Individuals are held responsible for outcomes they could not meaningfully prevent.
- Institutions disclaim responsibility while exercising systemic power.
- Appeals to fairness feel hollow, even when formally correct.
- Moral outrage cycles without resolution.

Responsibility has outlived its bearer.

Why Consciousness Will Not Save Us

It is tempting to imagine that restoring consciousness—whether to machines or to humans “in the loop”—would restore responsibility. This is a category error.

Responsibility has never depended on inner experience. Corporations, states, and bureaucracies have long borne responsibility without consciousness. Conversely, many conscious beings have never been treated as responsible agents.

What mattered was custody: the recognized capacity to intervene before an action closed.

Where custody is absent, consciousness arrives too late to matter.

The New Condition

We are entering a condition in which responsibility persists as a social necessity but no longer maps cleanly onto agency. This does not abolish morality. It transforms it into a governance problem.

The central question is no longer:

Who is responsible?

But:

Where can responsibility still land without fiction?

Until this question is answered operationally rather than rhetorically, societies will continue to punish without authors, govern without decision-makers, and demand legitimacy from systems designed to evade ownership.

Responsibility has not disappeared. Its bearer has.

And that—not artificial intelligence, not automation, not consciousness—is the moral rupture of our time.

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